

CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ACROSS GENERATIONS IN ITALY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY¹

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The analysis of demographic trends indicates that among EU countries, Italy is characterized by the longer delay before youths can accomplish some fundamental psychosocial transitions (to work, leave parents' home and marry), and take on significant roles and responsibilities in the political, professional, and social arena. One question is whether such condition of prolonged (forced) moratoria may have an impact on the process of civic and political socialization of Italian youths, contributing to the explanation of their increasing disaffection toward political and civic engagement, their perceived distance from political and civic institutions and low willingness to be actively involved, as reported by national surveys.

In order to provide some answers to this question, we investigated the perspectives of young people and significant adults on the factors that facilitate or hinder Italian youths' civic and political participation. The data were drawn from 14 focus groups and 3 interviews conducted with adolescents (16-18 yrs old), and young adults (20-26 yrs old), male and female, and 5 individual interviews with adults (teachers, parents, media people). The data were content analysed using NVIVO7.

A portrait of Italian youths' participation: young people perspective

There is a general consensus on the idea that the younger generation (considered as a social category) has low levels of involvement and participation. Participants recognized that some informed, engaged and involved young people do exist, even if they represent a small minority. The majority of young Italian people are depicted as having limited interest in participation and lack of information and awareness of their rights and duties.

Two main *explanations* were provided. The more general is youths' and adolescents' **indifference toward social and political issues**, for which individual and societal reasons are suggested. The second, is youths' **disappointment, a pessimistic attitude, and feelings of powerlessness**, following negative experiences (direct, indirect) of participation (e.g. protests on Education reform; experiences in representative bodies in local councils and political parties). Only a few participants to FG (scouts, student representatives) report positive personal experiences of participation, defined as "the opportunity to count" or to have an influence giving valuable contributions, and thus, to be taken into account (e.g. by adults, by local administration).

From participants' responses, it appears that the existence, in Italy, of several *structural opportunities for youths* for expressing their views (formal groups, conventional political and

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electoral participation, non conventional and protest, internet participation) is not sufficient for enhancing youths' engagement. Not all forms/contexts are considered as equally accessible to youths: e.g. participation in decision making in politics is very limited, contrary to internet use, which is seen as a good instrument for obtaining and sharing information and for social and political participation. Moreover, not all forms/contexts are seen as equally effective: e.g. demonstrations and protest movements are seen as ineffective in impacting political decisions and in producing social change, whereas participation in formal groups experiences, like scouts, religious groups, volunteer associations, student associations and similar is considered effective in helping members facing real life problems and increasing their knowledge and awareness of social issues as well as developing competences. Thus, they are a worthwhile experience even though it remains a "niche" type of participation. Consistently with this result, participants reporting greater actual/prior experience of participation (mostly young adults), greater involvement in formal groups and exposure to political and social issues in school and family showed greater knowledge and *information* on existing opportunities for participation, and also greater *interest*, awareness and concern.

Besides these more "basic" preconditions of participation (personal resources like interest, motivation, values; information about existing opportunities; time/material resources), a crucial condition is youths' **access to power (i.e. involvement by adults in decision making processes over social and political issues) and empowerment (resulting from satisfactory participation experiences)**. On this point, however, participants describe themselves as "a powerless group", and feel that youths have no opportunities to have an influence and contribute to social change because in Italy, youths are not recognized as an active subject whose opinions matter. Youth are not considered stakeholders; when they are involved (e.g. by political parties), they are usually exploited (tokenism).

This lack of consideration for youths, by adults, is seen in connection with the widespread negative representation of young people in Italian society and in the media (e.g. by overemphasising in the press the episodes of risky and deviant behaviours and ignoring more positive youth models).

Moreover, participants feel that adults (and politicians) have no real interest toward youth's opinions and views and do not consider them worthy of attention and investment

Why should a politician listen to young people? What are the benefits for him? [Italian young adults]

In my view there is not [by adults] this willingness to risk on and invest on youths, and take into account also their opinions, and expectations.. [Italian young adults]

Youths are perceived as not competent, owing to their age (competences are expected to be gained later on in life).

In my opinion, youth have opportunities, but if what you say is not considered because you are young, ...for example I am 17, I have not reached legal age yet, what you say, even if it may be right, is taken less seriously[Italian adolescents]

A portrait of Italian youths' participation: adults' perspective

Also adults agree in considering youths (as a general social category) as scarcely informed, uninterested and unaware of their social and political rights and duties, and scarcely willing to be involved, unless some incentives are provided. "*spontaneous participation does not exist, it should be provoked*" (teacher). Some involved young people do exist, but they are a small minority. Explanations point to the role of different factors:

Personal characteristics of youths, partly attributed to their age and considered as weaknesses: e.g. low self esteem, needed to openly express one's ideas and to organise with others in order to

defend them; a superficial attitude in dealing with some issues; “protagonism” without the willingness to deepen the reflection collectively; lack of a “sense of achievement”

it is very difficult to talk to them because they are not able to... they do not watch even the news on TV, they do not follow political news. [...] I have asked them.. no, no,... at home they do not talk about politics, they do not talk at all .. they do not know political parties, the difference between left wing and right wing parties. [female teacher, talking about Lycee students of the last years]

Family as a context capable of offering opportunities for growth and participation. In particular, lack of communication and parents’ own lack of knowledge/interest/distrust towards political representatives is mentioned.

School. Participants feel that low importance is given to participation experiences by school. In particular, they mention the following: lack of citizenship education (methodologies and effectiveness of activities, based on memory learning instead of actual involvement in significant experiences); a prevailing individualistic attitude at school, with a lack of “incentives” for cooperative behaviors; the consideration of the participatory activities as a loss of time:

..every year we have young people that come to school to promote civil service, and I see that opportunities available are even greater than those we had when we were young. However, I see that there is less participation, those who participate are involved by others who are already engaged, In my opinion such presentations are not effective [female teacher]

competition at school and in classes has enhanced individualism, and individualism is exactly the opposite of participation and solidarity. (media referent, Italian woman)

Sociocultural factors: adults feel that young people are not valued by the society, are excluded from decisional processes and from roles of responsibility. The Italian society is described as dominated by the older generations, leaving limited room to young people in politics, in work and more generally, in the domain of social and cultural development.

In particular, in politics young people have limited opportunities of taking initiatives, they occupy marginal positions, below their level of competence. Adults have great difficulties in understanding and listening to young people and are concerned about accepting and valuing youths’ ideas.

adults’ representation of young people in Italy is negative, they always consider them as idle, x generation, .. it is as if youth had no impact on the society because they are young and inexperienced. .

If these young people who display capacities and resources, were in other countries, they would be considered as producers. In Italy this does not happen because there is this gerontocratic bloc, a bloc of elderly that always propose themselves and therefore there is the myth of the “great person”, that seems to do whatever. [media referent]

Role of the media Participants mention the low quality of the information provided by the media (TV programmes, both information and entertainment, and control of information by politicians). Moreover, participants describe a situation of value crisis and dominance of consumerism models, promoting distorted images of youth (as consumers), that hinders young people involvement.

teachers say that ... when we organize a cultural trip there is boredom, whereas when they say shopping there is enthusiasm. This “I exist to the extent that I consume” model is obviously widespread. But this does not mean that all youth follow it, so you cannot generalize. But for sure, TV as a new educator produced a dissolution of some values

...there are new female models emerging that are challenging all female achievements of the 70es This phenomenon of “velinismo” ... In short, even for the ladies like me it is hard to age. [media referent, Italian woman]

However, adults recognize the usefulness of the web, as an instrument for getting information and for participation (the only one available to youth for political participation), even though it may have risks.

How do adults conceive youth participation and what are their expectations?

Participants seem to value youth participation, and describe it using terms such as “important”, “essential”, “necessary”, especially in a future-oriented perspective (when the youth generation will replace today’s adults carrying forward their work).

Adults' expectations seem to be consistent with the developmental pathway which is expected by the society: with age, youths should show increasing interest and awareness toward social and political issues, as well as more responsible behaviors toward social and political issues. In the meanwhile (until they will complete their education and enter the work context), they expect that youths will take part in formative experiences, seen as opportunities for growth and practice of competences. Such competences are seen as important because youths will be required to find by themselves (to "conquest") their place and role in society, by fighting with adults (politicians) who currently occupy and control such places. Such task is seen as very difficult and youths should be aware of that. Participants have difficulties in expressing specific expectations on the contents and contexts of expected youth participation; they do not seem to see a role for themselves in such process and therefore, they seem to delegate all responsibilities to youths.

Discussion

The Italian society was depicted by our participants (both young people and adults) as a *gerontocratic* society, with a negative attitude toward young people. System responsiveness to young people's issues and needs is low, because politicians, and more generally, people in charge, are considered old and distant from young people: they are not able to understand nor interested/willing to listen to young people's voice. Tokenism is the basic form of political participation that is allowed to young people, but it is common also in other decision making contexts over social and political issues. An exception are the structures and initiatives specifically aimed at youths (e.g. formal groups and associations).

The scarce attention of the Italian society toward young people results in negative psychological consequences: adolescents perceive themselves discouraged, young adults are pessimist, and disappointed: those who had previous negative experiences of participation share a condition of learned helplessness. This general picture leads to indifference toward social and political issues, with few exceptions, which shed some light on this "dark" picture .

Even if there is evidence that adults do not always facilitate youth participation, young Italian people do not seem ready to take on their responsibilities for active involvement, a perception that is shared also by adults. They ask for more power and opportunities but they are not willing to make any personal effort in order to get them, if this entails some costs; they say they have ideas but they remain under their family and school influences; they criticize the older generations, but they have lost the idea that there is a collective (a sense of we) besides individuals and that they could /should do something together to change their (collective) condition. Italian young people seem stuck in their present, incapable to envision their future: in a word, powerless.